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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a psychotherapeutic approach using psychodramatic procedures for training in handling of marital conflict. In this approach, persons are taught how to confront directly and deal actively with marital conflict situations. The author makes some theoretical assertions and then describes the psychodramatic procedures employed and the methods of conflict resolution taught through these procedures. The approach attempts to relate individual dynamics to the interpersonal context of the marital relationship. The therapist's function is to facilitate the marital partners' recognition of their needs, feelings, and expectations, and to help them express these fully to their partners. The general aims of the approach are to help each partner find ways to have his needs met without interfering with the satisfactions of the other, and find ways to help satisfy each other's needs. The author also presents guidelines for assessing the effectiveness of the protagonists in relating to each other. (Author/SJL)

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Facilitating Personal Growth in Marriage Via Psychodramatic Methods

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Although psychodrama was developed as a distinct school of therapy by Moreno and his followers (Corsini, 1966; Moreno, 1971), these techniques have been assimilated by various modern approaches to psychotherapy. In behavior therapy, for example, role-playing is used for behavior rehearsal and assertiveness training (Lazarus, 1971). In Gestalt therapy, psychodramatic procedures are used for "Gestalt experiments" such as those having to do with completion of self-expression (thinking being regarded as incomplete action) and for facilitating identification with disowned aspects of the person to increase awareness and responsibility (Naranjo, 1973).

In the approach being presented in this paper, psychodramatic procedures are used for training in methods for handlin; marital conflict. In this approach, persons are taught how to directly confront and actively deal with marital conflict situations.

Let me first make some theoretical assertions before describing the therapeutic procedures involved.

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Underlying Rationale

Each partner to a growing, constructive marital relationship must find ways to get his own needs met but also must respond to the needs of his partner if the relationship is to be additive rather than subtractive. In other words, the marital relationship is regarded as a source of additional satisfaction to each partner when each actively gives to and takes from this relationship. The relationship subtracts from the satisfaction of the partners when this is not the case.

Inevitably, conflicts arise and the course of the relationship depends greatly on the way these conflicts are handled. Awareness of these conflicts can be exciting for marital partners having adequate means for actively dealing with such conflicts in a way that strengthens their relationship. If the marital partners have inadequate ways for handling such conflicts so that the presence of conflict leads to deterioration of the relationship, then awareness of the presence of conflict can be anxiety-arousing.

Avoidance tactics are often used to handle situations where there is discomfort and where adequate methods for handling the situation are lacking. In the marital situation, such tactics include ignoring the presence of conflict, distorting the conflict, defusing conflict before it can arise, etc. The use of such tactics preserves surface tranquility but, at the same

time, creates a climate of unreality. The potential of the marriage relationship for excitement and satisfaction is diminished. Partners of such a relationship often feel vaguely bored and dissatisfied. They recognize that something is wrong with their relationship but cannot seem to identify what is "missing."

Another means whereby inadequate marital partners deal with marital conflict is by, in some way, diminishing or eliminating the other partner via direct and/or indirect assaults. This "nagging destructiveness" is often off target in the sense that the attacks are focused upon the person of the opponent rather than upon specific objectionable behaviors. Catharsis of anger without mutual attempts to come to grips with specific concrete issues leads to stalemated mutual warfare carried on openly or covertly (via passive-aggressive tactics).

The approach being taught here is that of active confrontation of conflict in the present by both participants while maintaining the relationship (contact). The quality of the relationship at the termination of conflict episodes is the criterion for assessing the success of conflict resolution tactics. If the marital partners have achieved more intimacy as well as getting some of their needs met, then the outcome is regarded as happy as far as the growth of the relationship is concerned. If the marital partners have less intimacy at conflict termination, even though they may obtain concessions from each other, this outcome

is regarded as less satisfactory for the relationship.

The present approach to marital conflict, it seems to me, offers the marital partners opportunities to experience what and how they contribute to their relationship as well as what they get from this relationship. It allows each marriage partner to experience himself as impactful and assertive in both giving to and taking from his partner. It permits him to see himself as a potent contributor to a relationship that he is in the continuous process of creating or destroying.

In a creative marital relationship, then, the partners constantly work on what they will have together, the "we" of the relationship. Integration is the goal of this work, not winning and losing points. Active confrontation of differences while maintaining contact leading to creative integrations defines a growing marital relationship. The avoidance of conflict by destructiveness or evasion leads to alienation and deterioration of the marital relationship.

Therapeutic Techniques

First, I will describe the psychodramatic methods employed, and then I will describe the methods of conflict resolution taught through these psychodramatic procedures.

Psychodramatic methods. I prefer an experience-based approach in which participants can become actively and holistically involved. For these purposes, I find the psychodramatic methods to be

especially useful.

In addition, the psychodramatic methods are very flexible. The following four variations are offered to illustrate the possibilities:

1. Therapy participants can be asked to relive a stressful conflict. The interaction can then be examined by therapist, protagonists, and audience, and alternative ways of interacting can be suggested and experimented with in replays of the same conflict situation. For example, a couple may bicker about an event that occurred several months previously and they seem to be stuck in endlessly nagging each other about this event. These persons may be asked to relive the conflict situation in the present. Other modes of interaction may be suggested by therapist and audience and the protagonists may experiment with some of these suggestions by replaying this conflict.

2. Marriage partners can be asked to enact their fantasies regarding the nature of their relationship. This gives each partner a feel for where his mate is coming from. This can lead into reality testing if there is distortion or to change in the relationship if these fantasies are more or less valid. For example, one participant was asked to enact her fantasies regarding her husband's dominance over her. As the drama unfolded, it became clear to the therapist and audience, and finally to the participants, that the wife was not as completely powerless as

she had initially described herself but had considerable power over her husband via passive-aggressive tactics. She then set about learning more direct means for dealing with her husband.

3. Marital partners can be asked to enact their fantasies regarding alternative courses of action. This provides opportunities for experimentation with these alternative action patterns and assess their possible consequences. Thus, for example, one couple was asked to enact a fantasied encounter which might occur after a separation that both feared but desired.

4. The therapist can employ already constructed roleplay situations into which he can "plug" participants. This variation is particularly useful in training groups with time limitations that preclude the more natural emergence of marital problems. Such a procedure can also be used with a very up-tight group to illustrate the effects of various expectations and styles of coping. Such ready-made conflict situations can also be used to break a group in, after which the roleplay can emerge more naturally from the problems being presented by group members. In each such roleplay situation, the therapist gives instructions to each protagonist while the others are out of earshot. These instructions have to do with giving the protagonists past experiences and expectations based upon these experiences. After the instructions, the protagonists are called together and the therapist plunges them into a conflict situation. The therapist and

audience observe until the action reaches some sort of completion. After process analysis, the protagonists may be asked to replay the conflict situation.

In all of these variations of psychodrama, it is assumed that the protagonists (by immediate experience) and audience (by identification) are learning general modes of conflict resolution that they may apply to their ongoing extratherapy marital relationships.

These variations differ from the traditional psychodrama methods developed by Moreno (1971) in which the focus was upon the protagonist and his internal dynamics. The present approach in no way excludes individual dynamics but ties these into the interpersonal context of the marital relationship. Since the husband and wife are regarded as the core of the marital relationship, most of the methods used in this approach incorporate two protagonists with supporting figures when necessary. The aim is to have both husband and wife identify their needs, feelings, and expectations and fully express these to their partner. When full expression is achieved, then areas of agreement and differences can be clearly identified. When differences are conflicful in that the methods for achieving satisfaction used by one person interfere with the satisfactions of the other, then this can be worked on. In summary, the therapist facilitates the marital partners' recognition of their needs, feelings, expectations,

etc. and full self-expression so that each partner knows the inner reality of his mate as much as possible. The therapist can then help each partner to find ways to get his needs met without interfering with the satisfactions of the other, and find ways to get the couple to satisfy each others' needs, or whatever.

Guidelines for conflict resolution. In observing the action as it unfolds, the therapist, the psychodrama protagonists, and the remaining group members (audience) have at their disposal a set of more or less explicit guidelines for assessing the effectiveness of the protagonists in relating to each other. These guidelines were derived from the writings of Bach (Bach & Goldberg, 1974; Bach & Wyden, 1968) and Gordon (1968).

In assessing the outcome of conflict, what is important is not winning or losing (a la the Western "showdown") but the quality of the relationship at the termination of the conflict. These guidelines, therefore, are oriented toward helping marital partners win more intimacy rather than winning points.

The tactics used by marital partners are a crucial determinant of constructive outcomes. The struggle to win solely for oneself ends in the defeat of the relationship -- both lose. On the other hand, giving in to the partner makes for dissatisfaction for the one who gives in and also cripples the relationship in the long run -- both lose. The general purpose of these guidelines, then, is to spell out behaviors whereby both can win

so that the relationship is strengthened, not weakened, as the result of conflict.

The guidelines, in their present stage of formulation, are as follows:

1. Assumptions. Protagonists are led to see how their assumptions about the motivations of another person affect their behavior toward that person. Guessing about the internal "reasons" or "causes" for the other's actions is discouraged. The "psychoanalyzing game" engaged in by psychologically sophisticated persons is discouraged. All labeling, sweeping generalizations, telling another whether his views are real or important, telling another what he should do, feel, or think is discouraged. Reality testing of assumptions in a nonintrusive fashion is encouraged. A marital relationship becomes more real, exciting, and satisfying when partners are able and willing to check out what the other partner is thinking and feeling and what he will accept and reject.

2. Dealing with the past. Where marital partners are in their relationship is to some extent a result of their past interactions with each other. Recognizing that emotional reactions, behavior, and expectations are affected by learning is different from blaming or holding the other responsible for the ongoing difficulties in the relationship. The "blaming game" and the "guilt arousal game" are dead-end games if improvement of the relationship is wanted. These games alienate marital partners

and distract them from dealing actively with the current situation. The past cannot be changed. Only the present can be dealt with. Yet many couples persist in digging about in the past looking for errors, gripes, etc. Persons who have failed to deal adequately with each other often blame the other party for the failure of the relationship in order to reduce their own feelings of inadequacy. Holding the other culpable takes attention away from oneself. One does not then truly assess what he has done and is doing himself to make the relationship what it is nor does he have contact with his own resources for making things better for himself. So playing the "blaming game" is discouraged while getting marital partners in touch with their impact upon each other in the present is encouraged.

3. Self-expression. As a necessary precondition for marital satisfaction, partners must be able to openly express their psychological states, their wants, interests, demands, etc. If self-expression is insufficient on either side of the relationship, the first therapeutic step is to work on fuller self-expression. Being intolerant of one's own feelings or being punitive toward one's partner for expressing his feelings leads to inadequate contact in the relationship. For example, there is the marital partner who tries to make his mate feel guilty for his or her "childish emotionality." Avoidance of self-expression is discouraged while self-disclosure of ongoing feelings, needs,

expectations, etc. is encouraged.

4. One issue at a time. The task of the protagonists is to remain with the issue under consideration. Attempts to break away from dealing with the issue (such as bring up other issues, bringing up the past, the use of passive-aggressive tactics, etc.) should be observed and commented upon. Open confrontation regarding the issue at hand is encouraged. In practice, this means that the issue must be specific and only reasonable specific behavioral changes should be requested. The technique of paraphrasing is often useful here because it fosters checking out of whether or not the protagonists have heard the messages being sent about the issue at hand.

5. Balance. Each marital partner must have the opportunity to make his side of the issue fully known. The views of each partner must be accepted as real and valid by the other partner. This is the way he sees things and the other must come to terms with this in some way. In addition, in working through a conflict issue, every demand should be balanced by a counterdemand, every concession by a counterconcession. A demand should be clearly understood and responded to before a counterdemand is made.

In my practice, I have found that following these rules facilitates positive outcomes in the psychodramatic sessions. Protagonists maintain contact (relationship) while working actively at the ongoing conflict in the present and end up having won

together a closer relationship. As psychodrama participants experience these behaviors working for them, they assimilate some of these behaviors into their everyday encounters with each other. Thus, learning how to deal with marital conflict in the psychodramatic situation can transfer to the extratherapy relationship, hopefully leading to a more effective and satisfying marital relationship.

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